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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007574

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PROP SOCI KPAO TH

SUBJECT: OLD FRIENDS, BAD DEALS, AND COMMUNITY RADIO: THE
STORY OF THE REOPENING OF 92.25

REF: A. BANGKOK 5419

1B. BANGKOK 7197

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. On December 1, Embassy Officers visited controversial community radio station 92.25. Station personnel reported that the station had started up operations a week after the August raid (Reftel A) and was now technically broadcasting their programs solely on the Internet, which were then picked up by unaffiliated "allied community radio stations" which broadcast their programs on the 92.25 frequency. The station manager told Emboffs that he believed the station would not be targeted so long as the government was "preoccupied" with other issues. He also noted that station's costs were borne by one sponsor- the troubled Thai Petrochemical Industry Group (TPI). While the station has become an important forum for opposition voices in Thailand, it appears to be operating under the watchful patronage of another former tycoon, Prachai Liewpairat, an ally of Thaksin critic Sondhi Limthongkul. END SUMMARY

Pink Paper

12. (SBU) December 1, Pdoeff and Poloff visited the new offices of radio station 92.25 FM (Reftel A). The bare-bones "station" consisted of a mostly empty floor of TPI's (Thai Petrochemical Industry Group) Bangkok office building. A few staff members were running the equipment, while the host of the program airing during Emboff's visit was calling in his show from home. The windows overlooking the street and on the front door were covered with sheets of pink paper. Station staff explained that they were concerned about "dark forces peeking in" on their activities.

13. (SBU) Station Manager Somchai Meechane said the station had resumed its Internet transmissions about a week after it was raided and shut down on August 9. On September 10, 92.25 resumed radio broadcasts by feeding the Internet transmissions to about ten "allied stations", which are technically unaffiliated with 92.25 but broadcast on the 92.25 FM bandwidth. The station broadcasts 19 hours per day, from 6 a.m. until 1 a.m. The station's schedule now includes a variety of political programming including one-man talk radio, call-in shows and interviews with prominent local personalities. Somchai told Emboffs that all the "allied stations" are located around Bangkok, except for one in Khon Kaen. Somchai said that he believes these indirect broadcasts will dissuade Thai authorities from harassing them, at least in the short-term. Somchai also noted that the government was "preoccupied" with other issues at the moment and that the RTG might target the station again in the future.

Follow the Money?

14. (SBU) Somchai confirmed to Emboffs that the station's production costs were paid for entirely by their sole sponsor -- plastics and cement conglomerate TPI. TPI went bankrupt in the 1997 crash, and has since faced well-publicized, long-standing debt problems. TPI's founder Prachai Liewpairat -- who technically no longer controls his company -- is reportedly quite close to government critic Sondhi Limthongkul, with whom he had business dealings prior to 11997. When PM Thaksin founded TRT in 1999, he allegedly promised both men that he would change Thailand's bankruptcy laws to allow them to reassume control of their business empires -- a promise that the PM failed to keep. The relationship between these tycoons and Thaksin has since soured. In early 2005, Prachai tried to bring in a Chinese financial company to help bail out TPI. According to rumor, Thaksin was instrumental in preventing this bailout from happening. Soon after that, 92.25 began taking potshots at the Prime Minister. Station manager Somchai said the station had had no problems when it opened in March, and only began having trouble with the Government when it started broadcasting political programs in June.

16. (SBU) Sondhi Limthongkul's "The Manager" newspaper and 92.25 FM have settled into a cozy, symbiotic relationship. "The Manager" and its website publicly advertise that Thais should listen to his show live on 92.25. Meanwhile, the

station's anti-Thaksin slant is frequently complimentary and sympathetic to Sondhi and his cause. (Reftel B)

17. (SBU) Note: Somchai, the station manager, is also well-known in Bangkok journalist circles. In 1998, he was fired from the Bangkok Post after 68 journalists filed a petition with the Press Council, accusing him of taking bribes from politician Suwat Liptapalop (now a TRT MP.) He later left the Democrat-allied Naew Na newspaper after trying to set up a deal to sell shares of the newspaper to "business interests". He is said to maintain close links to the Democrat Party.

18. (SBU) COMMENT. The interesting history of personal relationships involving Thaksin, Sondhi and Prachai offers a new perspective on the reasons for this "democratic" opposition radio station's existence. Thailand lacks independent and objective media; news sources that are independent of the government are inevitably dependent on someone. Despite its origins as a platform for a Thaksin opponent with a personal axe to grind, 92.25 has played a useful role, providing political dissenters with an all-too-rare forum to express their views. Until the legal and economic structure develops sufficiently to support more impartial media, this is probably about the best we can expect. END COMMENT.
BOYCE